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AUTHOR McWatters, Maria DeGise
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether there is a difference in the self-concept of retarded readers and achieving readers at the high school level. Subjects, 30 retarded readers in a special education program and 30 normal or above achieving readers from two suburban high schools in Staten Island, New York, completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Results indicated that the retarded readers had positive but unrealistic ideas, goals, and aspirations concerning themselves. However, frequent observations inferred that these adolescents had an adequate view of self, as did observations of the group of normal or above achieving readers. (Two tables of data are included; 21 references and two tables of data are attached.) (Author/RS)

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The Self-Concept of the
Retarded Reader and the Achieving Reader
at the High School Level

By

Maria DeGise McWatters

Accepted
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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts Degree
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December 1989

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. Abstract	ii
II. Acknowledgements	iii
III. List of Tables	iv
IV. The Self-Concept of the Retarded Reader and the Achieving Reader at the High School Level	
Introduction	1
Hypothesis	3
Definitions	4
Procedures	4
Results	5
Conclusions & Implications	6
V. The Self-Concept of the Retarded Reader and the Achieving Reader: Related Research	9
VI. References	20
VII. Appendices	
Appendix A	23
Appendix B	24

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference between the self-concept of retarded readers and that of achieving readers at the secondary school level. Does the self-esteem of these two samples have any relation to their reading achievement?

It was observed that retarded readers in a special education program at a public high school in Staten Island, New York had positive, but unrealistic ideas, goals, and aspirations concerning themselves. This appeared true regardless of the fact that many of the people they interact with often treat them with disdain, expect little of them and impart their biased views of what special education can accomplish. Nonetheless, frequent observations inferred that these adolescents had an adequate view of self, as did observations of a sample of normal and above achieving readers attending a Catholic high school in the same town.

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List of Tables

	<u>Page</u>
I. Mean, Standard Deviation and <u>t</u> of the <u>Woodcock Reading Mastery</u> <u>Test</u> of the two samples.	5
II. Mean, Standard Deviation and <u>t</u> of the <u>Piers-Harris Children's</u> <u>Self-Concept Scale</u> of the two samples.	5

As educators, the self-esteem of adolescents should be considered an important aspect of the academic and social growth of the student. Feeling good about oneself seems like something that is easy enough to do, and at first glance, it may even seem as if it is not a very important factor in the big scheme of things. However, this is not the case. Studies of William Padelford (1969) and Maxine Cohn and Donald Kornelly (1970) find that a significant positive relationship does exist between reading achievement and self-concept. Padelford finds that this relationship exists regardless of sex, socioeconomic level or ethnicity. It is for this reason that the affective development of the adolescent should be a concern of every educator.

Although adolescents may be different from each other in a variety of ways, including academically, the need for a positive self-concept is essential for all. The question is do all adolescents have the same self-concept, and is it all positive? This seems unlikely, as determined by Waldron, Saphire and Rosenblum (1987). Their studies indicated that learning disabled students had inclinations towards lower self-concepts than non-disabled students. A similar study conducted by Jackson, Enright and Murdock

(1987) shows that as children get older and their social perceptions improve, the views of the non-learning disabled students were superior to the learning disabled reader.

It seems that those adolescents who have a positive self-image may be more willing to attempt challenges, both academically and socially, because they feel that they will be successful. On the other hand, the adolescents who have poor opinions of themselves might be less likely to try new things, take risks, again both academically and socially, because they expect to fail. Rising to a challenge and a willingness to attempt what is new and different seems related to academic achievement and a positive self-image. This is usually not a characteristic of the retarded reader, accustomed to failure and frustration, but may be a characteristic of a normal achieving reader who may have experienced a significant amount of success, comparatively speaking. James Chapman (1987) states:

"People who hold positive self-concepts usually try harder and persist longer when faced with difficult or challenging tasks. On the other hand, students who feel relatively worthless and ineffectual tend to reduce their effort or give up altogether when work is difficult."

If, when defining reading, we agree with Thorndike and

say that reading is thinking, then the affective component is clearly brought to the reading process. The reader brings so much of him or herself to reading through his or her thoughts, that what he or she thinks of him or herself is also added baggage. If the thoughts and perceptions of self are positive, the student will bring to and take from the reading something very different than the person whose thoughts and perceptions of self are negative and filled with doubt and frustration. During adolescence, a volatile time to begin with, the self-concepts of retarded and achieving readers are something which need to be monitored, nurtured and carefully considered, regardless of the difference (or lack of) between the two. We, as educators must be aware of this to fully bring out all that each student is capable of achieving.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is that there is no significant difference between the self-concept of a sample of retarded readers and that of a sample of normal and above achieving readers at the secondary school level.

Definitions

Self-concept: One's idea of oneself or one's status.

(Webster, 1984)

Self-esteem: Satisfaction with oneself. (Webster, 1984)

Reading achievement: Progress in reading made by a student as measured by the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test.

Procedures

Two groups of high school students were chosen as the samples for this study. The first sample, A, consisted of 30 retarded readers in a special education program and the second sample, B, consisted of 30 normal and above achieving readers, as validated by scores from the standardized Woodcock Reading Mastery Test.

The students are a representative sample from two suburban high schools in Staten Island, New York, with a varied ethnic and socioeconomic background. Both samples were instructed by the same teacher on how to complete the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, during a morning class. These completed questionnaires were then scored and the differences between the means analyzed using t tests.

Results

As noted in Table I, the results of the Woodcock

Table I - Woodcock Reading Mastery Test

Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
Achieving Readers	11.91	.89	30.74
Retarded Readers	3.87	1.13	

Significant < .01 level
58 DF

Reading Mastery Test given to each sample, achieving readers versus retarded readers show, not unexpectedly, a highly significant difference between the means of the two samples. The achieving reader sample are reading on the average almost at the twelfth grade level, eight years above that of the retarded reader sample.

Table II, on the other hand details the means of the

Table II - Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale

Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
Achieving Readers	54.37	12.10	.37#
Retarded Readers	55.40	8.71	

samples on a measure of self-concept. As can be seen, the t of .37 is not significant. It can also be seen that the retarded reader sample has a slightly better self-concept (a one point difference) and are more similar in their views as judged by the smaller standard deviation.

Conclusions and Implications

At a quick glance, the question as to whether the self-concept of a retarded reader at age fifteen is significantly different from that of an achieving fifteen-year-old reader may seem obvious - "of course it must be." Given the data here, however, this is certainly not the case, and the hypothesis of this study, that there would be no difference in the self-concept of retarded readers when compared to that of achieving readers, must be accepted.

Retarded readers in a special education program have a view of themselves that is similar to that of normal and above achieving readers in a non-specialized education program. This may be due to several things. One reason may simply be that the retarded readers lack the intelligence to realize that they are not achieving nearly as much as others their age, academically speaking. Through observation and along these same lines, it appears that many adolescent retarded readers are simply unrealistic in

regard to goals, aspirations, sense of self and a sense of the world around them and their place in that world.

Another reason for the similarity in self-concept between achieving and non-achieving readers at this age can be linked to the idea of homogeneous grouping. If our self-concept is affected in part by those around us, then those retarded readers who spend all day with other students achieving (or not achieving) on the same level, may have an inflated or unrealistic view of self that is based on, or reflected by those around them. The same idea would hold true for the achieving adolescents. The question arises, however, as to whether the non-achieving reader's self-concept is inflated or the achieving reader's self-concept is unrealistically low.

Still another assumption one can make after examining the results could simply be the lack of importance fifteen-year-olds put on academic achievement, and it's relationship to the way they feel about themselves. They may not feel that being a good reader makes one a better person, or consequently being a poor reader makes one a bad person. Adolescence is certainly a time of emotional upheaval and academic achievement may just be low on the list of priorities for these students.

These conclusions, however, lead the educator to a fork in the road. Are we glad to think that self-concept and

reading achievement may not go hand in hand? Should we be pleased to know that we can "just teach" (if there is such a thing) without worrying about such an overwhelming variable as the adolescent self-concept? On the other hand, does this give the educator an added burden of lifting the self-concept of the normal achieving reader or trying to encourage the retarded reader to be more realistic? It seems this study has raised more questions than it has answered, and has left the educator in a precarious position. For this reason, the implication for teachers must be to keep teaching, no matter what obstacles we come up against. Above all, perhaps the most important implication for the teacher is to keep looking. When dealing with something as fragile and complex as the adolescent reader's self-concept, we must not accept anything at face value. There is so much more to be examined and so much more to learn. Educators have that unique opportunity for observation and should take full advantage of this opportunity at all times. The more we learn, the better chance we have to ensure and provide a better future for our students.

The Self-Concept of the
Retarded Reader and the Achieving Reader:
Related Research

When speaking of a child's self-concept, it is important to understand the implications of such a term, as it basically reflects how a child feels about him or herself. Exactly what is a self-concept and why is it important in regard to children and their academic ability? Labenne's (1969) definition is as follows:

"Self-concept, as it is generally used in the professional literature is a group of feelings and cognitive processes which are inferred from observed or manifest behavior. By way of a formal definition, self-concept is the person's total appraisal of his appearance, background and origins, abilities and resources, attitudes and feelings which culminate as a directing force in behavior. We here hold that a person's conscious awareness, what he thinks and feels, is that which primarily guides, controls and regulates his performance and action." (p. 10)

Combs, in Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming (1962) has this to say:

"The self-concept is learned. People learn who they are from the ways in which they have been treated by those who surround them in the process of their growing up. This is called learning about self through the mirror of other people. People discover their self-concepts from the kinds of experience they have had with life - not from telling, but from experience. People develop feelings that they are liked, wanted, acceptable, and able from having been liked, wanted, accepted and from having been successful. One learns that he is these things, not from being told so, but only through the experience of being treated as though he were so. Here is the key to what must be done to produce more adequate people." (p.84)

According to Webster (1984) quite simply self-concept is one's idea of oneself or one's status, while self-esteem according to the same source is satisfaction with oneself. If taken at face value, it appears simple enough, without earth-shattering consequences; however the way one feels about oneself goes to and comes from the very core of who we are and what we show and give to the rest of the world. It determines how we treat the people we come in contact with, and how we silently and subtly tell them we expect to be treated. In this respect, it is part of how our lives are shaped, who our friends are, what we become.

During childhood, which extends from birth to eighteen years (although do not try telling a seventeen-year-old that he/she is still enjoying childhood!), it seems that children are like sponges, absorbing everything around them. The "formative years", as they are frequently called, are so important for the future. Lucille Sebeson (1970) quotes Strang (1965, 1967) and says of self-concept:

"Self-concepts are learned. They are built up in many subtle ways. They are derived in part, by negative comments of parents, teachers and classmates and from repeated experiences of failure. The child becomes fearful of making mistakes, afraid and ashamed to be wrong again. Self-confidence, on the other hand, arises when others show a positive expectancy that the individual can close the gap between his present performance and his potential: it is reinforced by experiences of success." (p. 461)

Feelings of inadequacy and nervousness, or feelings of discouragement may suggest a low self-concept and end up under-achieving in academics.(Sebeson, 1970). If children do not develop a healthy self-concept, a feeling of self-worth at this time, it may have a devastating effect on who they become. If they do not like themselves, why should anyone else like them, why should they bother being a good person, why should they bother to learn, if they are not "worth it?" Children tend to see things in these simplistic terms, and this is part of the reason why many people believe the development of a healthy self-concept is so vital, and is the responsibility of all who deal with children, including and especially parents and teachers.

If we consider a healthy self-concept to be a necessary component for adequate social, emotional and academic growth, then the question arises as to whether there is a significant difference in self-concept between the retarded readers and achieving readers. As with many things in life, there is no definitive answer, but different schools of thought and varying opinions. There are studies that conclude there is no difference in the self-concept between these two groups and others that indicate there is indeed a difference in their self-concept. Allowing for the fact that there are many (intangible) variables in a study of this nature, it is usual for there to be a differ-

ence of opinion. For example, in an article by Beck, Roblee and Hanson (1982) their research, based on regular and special education students, investigated seven different aspects of self-concept and found no significant differences among the groups. In this article, the authors also cite several others who support their findings. However, all one needs to do is look in a different journal and find the opposite opinions and findings by other authors. One example of this would be the article by Waldron, Saphire and Rosenblum (1987). Using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale to measure self-concept, their studies strongly suggested that retarded readers had inclinations toward lower self-concepts than achieving readers. This is just a small sample of the vast difference of opinion among researchers and authors on this topic, and it is not unusual to find as many to support this hypothesis as there are to dispute it.

The role of self-concept and it's relation to academic achievement is not simple, and there are many factors which need to be considered. For instance, social support is one such factor. Although it appears that learning disabled adolescents on the whole seem to experience lower levels of self-esteem than non-disabled adolescents, those students with higher levels of perceived social

support (either retarded or achieving readers) usually scored higher in non-academic areas such as general self-worth, social competence and physical competence (Forman, 1988). Forman also cites a study by Ribner (1978), finding that learning disabled students not yet receiving special educational services were lower in academic self-concept than students already receiving these services (Forman, 1988). This suggests that the support given to the retarded readers in special education classes leads to a building of self-esteem, perhaps because those teachers involved see the need to support what may be already lacking in the student.

A study done by Sweeny and Zionts (1989) reports two sub-divisions of adolescent self-concept being body image and clothing. They found that regular achieving students in a regular educational setting reported a higher self-concept and more positive body image than retarded readers in a special education setting, although a difference involving clothing did not emerge. The authors feel the class labeled "hygiene" is not enough for the curriculum and better steps could be taken to teach adolescents to better understand themselves, be more realistic and change their poor perceptions of self into healthy ones.

When considering the self-concept of the adolescent retarded reader and the achieving reader, it is important to distinguish between academic self-concept and general self-concept, as James Chapman has in his research. While special education students scored lower on self-concept scales in both categories, he still found a significant difference in scores between the two (Chapman, 1988). It seems logical that, when faced with a different task, people with positive self-images would persevere rather than those with a poor self-image, who would expect to fail, too quickly feel the work is difficult and give up. In this way, does a student's self-concept affect his/her achievement? Achievement in school is more closely related to self-perceptions of ability than to general self-concept (Chapman, 1988). Findings in Chapman's study (1988) indicate that although special education students tend to have general self-concepts within normal range, they still scored lower than mainstreamed, or achieving students. The same results were suggested for test measuring academic self-concepts, although variables such as placement, I.Q. and motivational factors need to be considered. The results of another study (Pickar, Tori, 1986), suggests that because of years of failing at school tasks, retarded readers were unable to develop a sense of competence and duty. While

these adolescents felt unpopular and inferior about their academic abilities, their general self-concept was also within normal range, although lower than normal achieving adolescents. This does not seem to change as the child gets older. The results of studies indicate that as children get older and their social perceptions improve, the views of the learning disabled reader were inferior to the non-disabled reader (Jackson, Enright and Murdock, 1987).

It is the opinion of Winograd and Niquette (1988) that feelings of helplessness (related to self-concept) can influence reading achievement. They believe it would be helpful to teach the child coping strategies in order to combat the problem. James D. Wiggins (1987) through his studies found that there is indeed a connection between academic success and a healthy self-concept. Using the Self-Esteem Inventory, Wiggins' research suggests that without adequate self-perceptions, adolescents are not living up to their full potential. Mr. Wiggins cites Wiggins and Giles (1984), and states that affective education would be advantageous for school age children, in grades four through twelve.

There are others who not only find a connection between reading achievement and self-concept, but feel it is necessary to provide self-esteem building exercises in the

curriculum, for the retarded reader and the achieving reader. Ann Pollard Williamson quite simply feels that self-concept is the one factor related to personality that is most useful to reading teachers (Williamson, 1973).

Murray and Morrell (1979) write of an entire program in a high school in Virginia that is devoted to developing reading and vocabulary skills, as well as the development of a positive view of self, school, community and peers. Through improved reading development, vocational knowledge and psychomotor activities, this program aims increase the development of a positive self-concept (Murray, Morrell, 1979). Francis Pryor (1975) believes that a child's self-image is a strong factor in the success of anything a students does. He suggests it is the responsibility of all adults who deal with children to help them develop a positive self-concept and that this is the first step towards improving academic problems. Padleford (1969) found that a relationship exists between reading achievement and self-concept, regardless of ethnic group, socioeconomic level or sex. Rosow (1988) writes of adult illiterates, and claims self-esteem, self-improvement and personal pride were the main reasons for their seeking help now. The article further indicates that lack of praise and belittlement by teachers, peers and parents added to academic fail-

ure and negative self-esteem. The author quotes Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) and goes on to say:

"The learner experiences a mental block which prevents conscious access to learning. Fear of failure causes the (affective) filter to rise and self-esteem to diminish. With a lowered self-esteem, the learner is afraid to take risks and risk-taking is central to cognitive processing." (Rosow, 1988).

Others also seem to feel the need to build retarded and normal achieving readers self-concepts because they believe in the connection to increase success in reading. Francis Waters (1974) writes of a reading program developed with a colleague to help "immature" readers achieve. Her goals were to increase self-confidence, self-reliance and responsibilities (Waters, 1974). She reported that, at first, the major changes (for the better) were in the classroom behavior and self-concept, and at the end of the year, an improvement in reading skills.

Journal writing is another technique used by some to improve reading skills and self-concept of special education adolescents. Dan Ouzts writes:

"If journal writing should have a supportive relationship with reading, and if it can have a positive effect on reading achievement for the highschool student, then perhaps an important step has been taken in eliminating some of the frustration and disappointment of the disabled reader." (Ouzts, 1974).

For remedial readers, Matthew Ignoffo (1988) discovered that a curriculum that only deals with content and does not include any self-esteem building techniques is "doomed to fail" because of the "student's inner critic" ready to kill any improvement; the "inner critic" being those negative, unhealthy perceptions of self these children have (Ignoffo, 1988).

If we are to include self-concept development in the reading program, the self-concept, and its development may then be thought of as a basic skill, as vocabulary building, word attack and recognition skills are (Berretta, 1970). Shirley Berretta goes on to say:

"Self-concept is as much a factor in reading success as intelligence or mastery of basic skills. A program integrating reading instruction and development of positive self-perceptions is exciting because it offers the promise of meeting individual needs for learning and for good emotional development (Berretta, 1970).

In conclusion, because of the variables and complex nature of the individuals involved in such a study, generalizations should be made carefully, if at all, when trying to establish a difference, or in simple comparison of the self-concept of the retarded and the normal and above achieving reader. Regardless of whether or not there is a significant difference in the self-concept between these

two groups, there is much evidence to support the belief that self-concept is an important factor in the emotional, social and academic growth of all children. We as educators must contribute to the development of the healthy self-image of our children, and make them see their importance in this world, to others and to themselves.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Breakdown of Scores - Achieving Readers

	Woodcock Reading Grade Score	Piers-Harris Raw Score
1.	10.5	56
2.	11.8	69
3.	12.3	65
4.	12.9	50
5.	12.9	56
6.	10.9	63
7.	12.9	60
8.	12.3	29
9.	12.9	66
10.	11.3	74
11.	12.9	71
12.	12.9	53
13.	11.3	62
14.	12.3	57
15.	10.9	59
16.	10.9	40
17.	11.3	33
18.	11.3	65
19.	10.0	40
20.	11.8	51
21.	12.3	63
22.	11.3	54
23.	12.9	47
24.	10.9	33
25.	11.8	46
26.	12.3	61
27.	10.9	66
28.	12.9	34
29.	12.9	57
30.	12.9	51

Appendix B

Breakdown of Scores - Retarded Readers

	Woodcock Reading Grade Score	Piers-Harris Raw Score
1.	5.7	40
2.	6.2	52
3.	6.5	72
4.	4.2	48
5.	2.0	61
6.	5.4	45
7.	4.5	67
8.	4.2	59
9.	2.7	45
10.	3.5	45
11.	2.7	40
12.	3.1	49
13.	3.0	56
14.	3.5	65
15.	3.1	55
16.	2.8	52
17.	3.6	57
18.	3.9	62
19.	4.5	61
20.	4.5	68
21.	3.8	52
22.	2.9	60
23.	3.0	50
24.	3.4	68
25.	5.6	53
26.	2.8	43
27.	4.1	57
28.	3.8	56
29.	3.2	66
30.	4.5	58